

The merits of queer-inclusive education in EFL classrooms

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Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms comprise several groups of students with different backgrounds according to their nationality, race, class, ability, age, gender or sexual identity. Many EFL students in the US do not match the patriarchal norm of being male, white, middle class, young, heterosexual and able-bodied, resulting in an inherent disadvantage for them when learning the target language. Implicit biases which might arise in the classroom can negatively affect students' motivation, thus preventing them from producing meaningful language output and from negotiating their identities in the new social contexts provided in the classroom (Kaiser, 2017; Liddicoat, 2009). These implicit biases can enter the lessons through classroom materials and discourses which remain apolitical and outdated, not focusing on real life issues not being inclusive, diverse nor equal for all students who attend the lessons. Many classroom materials display stereotypes and silence oppressed communities in an implicit way through images, language, audio

recordings, and reading texts, among other means. According to Motschenbacher (2010 cited in Paiz, 2015) EFL and ESL textbook publishers usually delay the portrayal of societal changes in their texts. Consequently, societal changes carried out during 2020, including the LGBTQ+ protests in places including Poland and Thailand, the LGBTQ+-inclusive Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, and the feminist strikes which took place globally on the 8th of March of 2020 are not portrayed in these lessons.

For non-normative students (i.e. not male, not white, not middle class, not heterosexual, non-disabled, and all the possible intersections) to reach their potential in EFL classrooms, teachers should base their lessons in social justice and human rights by debunking stereotypes which may come up in the lessons through classroom materials, visibilising topics and collectives which are normally silenced from discourse, and by using inclusive language regarding race, gender, age and sexual diversity, for example. However, there seem to be disparities in teacher education, resulting in many teachers not being aware of the aforementioned issues, therefore unintentionally perpetuating the patriarchal system in their lessons. In order to have an inclusive EFL classroom it is essential for teachers to be implicated, allowing students to be represented by incorporating an inclusive co-education pedagogy that teaches English while transversally teaching about different real world issues like sexism, racism and homo/transphobia.

In this article, some tips, ideas and resources will be proposed to make EFL classrooms inclusive of all gender identities and sexual orientations (whilst always bearing in mind the intersections of race, ethnicity, class and ability), focusing on queer and trans-inclusive education.

Theoretical approaches to include gender and sexual diversity issues in the language classroom

There are several theoretical approaches supporting the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in the language classroom. Following Freire's (2000) pedagogy of the oppressed, teachers can only show solidarity with the oppressed students (gender and sexual diverse people with or without intersectionalities with race, class or ability in this case) when they start

seeing them as individuals who have been silenced and deprived of some of their rights. Teachers in this sense become allies to the oppressed and help fight for their rights in the classroom, giving them a voice and an accurate representation.

According to the Critical Pedagogy framework, teachers raise awareness of human rights and citizenship issues through discussing these issues with their students, analysing them critically, and thus developing a critical consciousness on otherwise silenced topics including gender and sexual diversity (Giroux, 2001).

Another approach is the Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007) according to which teachers shed light on gender and sexual diversity matters, , troubling hegemonic power relations, gendered assumptions and stereotypes. This may be done in subtle or more overt ways. Following this approach there is the Feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis, a method of analysis formulated by Judith Baxter in 2008, which combines Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis and Post-structuralist feminism. This involves teachers analysing classroom materials and discourse in their lessons and personally raising any inequity found.

The last approach outlined is Queer Theory, which aims at troubling social norms regarding gender and sexual diversity, such as heteronormativity or cisnormativity, for instance. Teachers following this approach focus on deconstructing heteronormativity and other oppressive boundaries in the classroom (Pennell 2020).

Each of the aforementioned theoretical approaches have been used in at least some EFL classrooms for years now, both separately and together. However, not every teacher is familiar with them or knows how to put them into practice due to first, the disparities in teacher training, or the lack thereof, and, second, to their implicit biases, as research has found that age, religion, political views, race and geographical location can have an effect on how teachers view LGBTQ+ students negatively. According to Hall & Rodgers (2018) the teachers who presented more negative attitudes were those with a fundamentalist religious orientation, those in the South, Midwest, and Mountain regions, and teachers of colour. In order to raise awareness among teachers it is imperative to include

teacher training in gender and sexual diversity; for instance, Riggs, Rosenthal & Smith-Bonahue (2011) claim that a combined cognitive-affective intervention can have a positive impact on pre-service teachers' attitudes.

The aim of the following section is to review some of the interventions put into practice in EFL classrooms including gender and sexual diversity issues and to give some suggestions of teaching materials and their uses in the EFL classroom.

Practical approaches for the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity in EFL classrooms.

In the past, several different attempts have been made to address gender and sexual diversity in the language classroom. Vandrick (2001) suggests the inclusion of human rights issues in everyday lessons, in order to fight racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. According to different studies (Paiz, 2015.; Vandrick, 2017..).... the inclusion of topics like gender identity should be transversal, that is, not at the centre of the curriculum or the protagonist of a unit, but rather included in a subtle way in every lesson. It is proposed that this will lead students to see the topics as something natural which is related to the lesson.

According to Paiz (2017), any teaching material can be 'queered', understanding 'to queer' as the troubling or challenging of otherwise patriarchal classroom discourse. This serves to create spaces where all gender identities and sexualities can be "engaged with in a manner that is both respectful of individuals and critical of all identity positions and subjectivities" (Paiz, 2017, p. 354). A clear example of queering the heterosexist curriculum could be by using authentic material created by the teachers where diversity is portrayed and every student can feel included in the lesson. However, this can be an arduous task, as it requires teachers to prepare their own material, and it is difficult to represent every marginalised collective in the lessons. As a result, another option to challenge the heterosexist discourse could be to queer the existing heterosexist discourses. This way, a teacher can use an extremely sexist advertisement, for instance, and discuss all the reasons why it is sexist or heteronormative, giving a voice to those individuals

who have been oppressed by that piece of discourse (Paiz 2015; 2017). Textbooks, discourses, activities, images and illustrations, films, songs, audio recordings, and even sexist language can be queered in the EFL classroom just by acknowledging how heteronormative or patriarchal they are, identifying stereotypes and defying them in the classroom discourse. Extremely heterosexist grammar examples can also be analysed, such as “Sandra is a nurse. Ben is a medical student.” (Latham-Koenig et al, 2012), posing questions such as “Why do you think the writers of this book chose to give Sandra a nurse job and portray Ben as a medical student?” This way, a discussion can be raised on how society attributes women those occupations which are related to caring and men those occupations which are considered more prestigious.

On the other hand, some of the previous research on the inclusion of gender and sexual diversity issues in the EFL classroom include specific activities such as bringing up news of violence against these oppressed collectives; using writing tasks for "imagine that..." essays, as “imagine having a different sexual orientation or a different gender identity”; using film, song or even literature (Vandrick, 2001). In addition, many researchers find literature a nice way to bring up the topic, Sanders & Mathis (2013) propose the use of books and plays which have characters with a different gender or sexual identity as the patriarchal norm, in order for students to connect with the stories and the characters. Guijarro Ojeda (2005) proposes the use of poetry in the EFL classroom to raise awareness around the social problems of our days, using a transversal approach. Additionally, some researchers propose using the grammar examples to portray other possible realities, for example “When I went to Alex’s house to drop off some paperwork, I met Jerry, who is his longtime partner” (Vandrick, 2001, p. 1), or “These two women are walking arm in arm” (Norton and Pavlenko, 2004, p. 5).

As acknowledged above, many scholars have studied how to address gender and sexual diversity inequities and, in the following section, some practical examples and resources are proposed to make EFL classrooms inclusive of all students, no matter their gender or sexual identity, whilst always bearing in mind the intersections of race, ethnicity, class and ability. These tips are aimed at all EFL teachers of all levels, ages and

institutions (public or private).

Practical guide to include gender and sexual diversity issues in the EFL classroom

In the EFL classroom, students are not learning the target language without context. they do so while acquiring a set of ideas which can appear in the *explicit* curriculum, i.e. the textbooks or other classroom materials, and in the *implicit* curriculum, that is, the teachers' speech, classmates' interactions, and norms and values which come from society (López-Ojeda, 2007), and the *null* curriculum, which refers to that content that is silenced in the classroom (Rodríguez, 2013). Thus, it is the teacher's job to challenge such patriarchal ideals in the classroom, while also practising the five key language skills outlined by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR): Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production, Listening, Reading and Writing.

EFL textbooks are replete with sexist language, from occupation roles to personality descriptors. In order to fight against sexism in language, teachers can convert sexist language into inclusive language by changing gender-specific words for their inclusive counterparts. In relation to occupations, *-man* compounds (*chairman*) can be changed to *-person* compounds (*chairperson*), some other *-man* compounds (*fireman*) can be changed to neutral words (*firefighter*) (Pauwels, 2003, p. 563). In relation to the family, gendered words such as *brother* or *sister* can be replaced by their neutral counterpart *sibling*. In regards to personal relationships, some words such as *boyfriend* or *girlfriend* can be changed to *partner*, for instance. Table 1 shows some of the most common gender-neutral words to use in English.

Occupations		The Family		General vocabulary	
Chairman	Chairperson	Brother or sister	Sibling	Guys or ladies and gentleman	Everybody
Handyman	Handyperson	Mother or Father	Parents	Man-made	Artificial
Waitress	Waitperson or server	Niece or Nephew	Nibling	Man-kind	Human-kind
Salesman	Salesperson	Boyfriend or girlfriend	Partner or significant other	Man or women	People
Air hostess	Flight attendant	Husband or wife	Spouse	Freshman	First-year student
Fireman	Firefighter	Son or daughter	Child	Handsome or beautiful	Good-looking
Policeman	Police officer	Miss or Mrs.	Ms.	He/she	They

Table 1: gender-neutral words to fight sexism in language.

Heterosexist books can be useful if the teacher chooses to use them critically by discussing and challenging the stereotypical representations portrayed (Harman, 1978) by selecting from these books role plays which include gender bias (Talansky, 1986), and reversing gender roles in the cases of subordination (Willeke and Sanders, 1978) to make them explicit. This way, according to Pawelczyk a teacher can “rescue” a sexist or extremely heteronormative text (2014, p. 56).

According to Chung and Courville (2008), books act as mirrors which reflect the world and, at the same time, they can provide a window into the lives of others, thus expanding students’ personal experiences. It is therefore important to present texts where characters are not heteronormative, that is, books which show people who normally are oppressed in society. This way readers will have empathy for them, even

if they do not know anyone who is oppressed in their everyday life.

In the present section, I will outline some literary recommendations to use in the EFL classroom, starting with kindergarten and primary school children's books. *And Tango Makes Three* (2005) by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell is an emotive story, based on real events, about two male penguins who fell in love and adopted a baby penguin at the Central Park Zoo. This book can open the door to discussions around different types of families and sexual diversity, as in this case, Tango has two fathers, instead of one mother and one father. In the same area, *Heather Has Two Mommies* (1990) by Leslea Newman can be used to start a debate about another type of non-normative family, one with two mothers. In relation to gender diversity I would suggest two books: *Pink is for Boys* (2018) by Robb Pearlman and *I am Jazz* (2014) by Jazz Jennings and Jessica Herthel. The first book can facilitate debate around what boys are supposed to like or not like according to patriarchal society, in this case the colour pink; the second book is about a trans girl who tells her story, which may be used to spark conversation around different gender identities. Secondly, for secondary school students and adults, on the topic of sexual diversity there is *Boyfriends with girlfriends* (2011) by Alex Sánchez, a book which follows a group of teenagers who have sentimental feelings for each other, and which presents homosexual relationships. In the light of gender diversity *Almost perfect* (2009) by Brian Katcher shows a trans character, Sage. This book is particularly important to comment on in class due to the language it uses; Sage says that being born a boy is her "big secret" which gives much importance to the fact that she is trans, a fact which should not actually be of so much significance to her identity. At the same time, it could prove revealing to discuss her friend Logan's feelings when he finds out that Sage is trans: why does he get angry, frightened and betrayed?

When possible, teachers can use the technological resources they have available in order to project films, series, music, music videos or short films in class. Paiz (2015) stated that merely incorporating queer popular media into the classroom is not enough. This is because tv and cinema, particularly in the United States, tend to stereotype and to whitewash LGBTQ+ identities and women (Sewell, 2004; Sonnekus, 2009 cited in

Paiz, 2017). What teachers can do to complement this is to ask students to write down sexist and heterosexist comments they see or hear in the film or commercial that they are watching (Chung and Courville, 2008). One of the films which can be analysed in Secondary school or with adult students is *But I am a cheerleader* (1999) directed by Jamie Babbit, a film about a lesbian cheerleader who gets sent to conversion therapy. This film will likely generate conversations about conversion therapy as well as posing the question: “What does a lesbian look like?”. It is very common for EFL lessons to feature listening activities of the type *fill in the gaps of the lyrics*. For this, teachers could choose songs which had lyrics referring to the issues we want to talk about in the lesson, for instance, *Born This Way* (2011) by Lady Gaga is a hymn to the LGBTQ+ community with lyrics as “Don't be a drag, just be a queen” or “No matter gay, straight or bi, Lesbian, transgendered life, I'm on the right track, baby, I was born to survive”. Thanks to this song we can learn about drag culture and how it dismantles the patriarchy, as well as the fact that “people are born this way”, which contradicts the idea that LGBTQ+ people “become” or “turn” gay. Another audiovisual input could be analysing music videos, which are much shorter than films, and also have the songs’ lyrics to analyse. *Symphony* (2017) by Clean Bandit featuring Zara Larsson tells the story of two black men who are in a romantic relationship. Here the classroom discussion could focus not only on homoromantic relationships, but also on the issues black gay men have to go through. Continuing with shorter content, one can add You. Tube videos, for example ‘Do you have a gender-bias?’ (2017). The video tells the following riddle: “A father and son get in a car crash and are rushed to the hospital. The father dies. The boy is taken to the operating room and the surgeon says, ‘I can’t operate on this boy, because he’s my son.’ How is this possible?” Students in class could then be asked to solve the riddle, and from their answers and the answers from the video the teacher could address gender stereotypes.

Art can also be a great resource for discussions – teachers can use images, photographs, paintings, sculpture or even make-up for students to analyse, describe and speak about. Artists can be discussed in class, in relation to either their art or their biographies; Frida Kahlo, for instance, could generate considerations of the intersections between gender,

disability, queerness and/or race, and Andy Warhol, whose sexual identity was criminalized and suppressed in the United States, would also make an interesting subject.

In order to avoid future oppressions, students should learn about historical movements as the feminist waves, the Stonewall riots, the Black Lives Matter movement, etc. (Benito, 2018; Pichardo, 2015). The introduction of these topics can be done by providing students with authentic reading materials from newspapers, for example. In this case, teachers would have to complete the textbook by including their own materials.

Teachers can use important dates to cover issues of sexism or LGBTQ+phobia explicitly. Potential suggestions include LGBT History Month, Gay Pride, Australian Mardi Gras, Brazil's Carnival, International Women's Day, International Day of Women and Girls in Science, World AIDS Day, International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia and Biphobia, and International Day of Peace (Pichardo, 2015).

As seen before, there are many ways of troubling the EFL classroom through authentic material (video, audio, reading, etc.). But there are still some more topics to be covered in the preferred format of the teacher in question such as the evolution of fashion, women in space, women in sports, LGBTQ+ famous people from history, same sex marriage, the family, sexist uniforms from around the world, gender roles, the gender binary in other societies, how periods are viewed around the world, feminism, etc. Many of these topics raise awareness of the intersectionality between topics like gender, nationalism, class and religion.

On the other hand, celebrities are often role models for teenagers, so by talking about oppressed celebrities, students can feel more connected to said topics. Some celebrities are openly LGBTQ+ (like Ricky Martin, Ellen Degeneres, Sir Ian McKellen, Jojo Siwa, Sam Smith, Laverne Cox, Elliot Page, Nikkie de Jager, Lil Nas X, Elton John, for instance), others are allies who choose to defy gender roles using fashion (Harry Styles, Bad Bunny, Jaden Smith, for example). In class we can talk about these famous people, show what they do and who they are, thus starting a

discussion about gender and sexual diversity. For instance, Haley Kiyoko is an openly lesbian singer and LGBTQ+ activist in the music industry who uses her platforms to raise awareness. On one occasion she critiqued Rita Ora's song 'Girls' (2018) for fuelling the male gaze while marginalizing the idea of women loving women.

Finally, it is important for teachers not presume universal heterosexuality, as it is very likely that at least one of their students will be LGBTQ+ or has family members or friends who are; and to use any "teachable moment" possible to include these topics: a comment, a look, an image, a sexist joke, etc. When encountered with homo/transphobic or sexist comments, according to Chung and Courville, "almost any response is better than ignoring the situation. You may not know exactly what to say, but you must stop the harassment." (2008, p. 55).

Limitations

Troubling the typical sexist and heterosexist discourse of the EFL classroom can be a challenge in itself. As it has been previously stated, textbooks do not help to overcome this social problem, it is the teachers who not only need to work on their own, look for or create specific materials which represent diversity, but also have to be cautious about the way students respond to these topics, as EFL classrooms are very diverse and there might be students who feel uncomfortable because of their backgrounds, such as religion or being an LGBTQ+ person still in the closet, for example. Sometimes students or their families can reject this pedagogical approach due to the fear of possible indoctrination, meaning that teachers feel compelled to explain the ethical reasons behind the decision to talk about these human rights issues in the classroom (Yoshihara, 2013).

Another limitation in the literature of this field is the lack of knowledge teachers have about these topics due to a lack of professional training (Pawelczyk, 2014; Yoshihara, 2013). Consequently, future training interventions on how to queer the EFL classroom should be a subject of further research. In order to effectively make EFL classrooms equal and safe to all students, all teachers will have to be trained in sexual-affective

diversity and gender equality (Benito, 2018; Davis and Skilton-Sylvester, 2004).

In addition, there are also limitations when putting all these suggestions into practice in the EFL classroom, as teachers will have to take into account their students' ages, backgrounds, linguistic ability, classroom materials available, etc. In the case that students do not have the linguistic ability to articulate their opinion in the target language, they could do so in the language of instruction or their mother tongue.

Conclusion

There is a need to challenge the sexist and heterosexist discourses in the EFL classroom, which, without a critical analysis, continues to perpetuate the oppression of minority groups such as women and LGBTQ+ individuals. This challenging – or *queering* – of the EFL classroom materials and discourse can be accomplished by training teachers in sexual-affective diversity and gender equality. However, until this kind of training is available for all EFL instructors, teachers can still challenge their classroom discourse by using the materials proposed in this article.

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